

## Conversation...

# Chief Del Walters

*By Janet Upton, public information officer, Butte Unit*



*Del Walters was appointed as Assistant Northern Region Chief on September 1, 2006. The Communiqué's Janet Upton caught up with Chief Walters during his travels around the state:*

### ***Tell us about your career with CAL FIRE.***

I started my career with as a Firefighter I in June of 1971 and was stationed at King City in the San Benito-Monterey Unit. I became a permanent fire apparatus engineer (FAE) there in 1977 immediately after receiving a degree in Forest Resource Management from Humboldt State University.

In 1981 I promoted to fire captain A in the Sonoma Unit and worked in several stations and the Emergency Command Center (ECC).

I promoted to a limited term (LT) battalion chief in 1985 and my primary objective was to essentially get rid of my job. The assignment was to transition the Sonoma County Schedule "A" program to the newly-formed Sonoma County Fire Service. The second part of that LT assignment was to attend POST.

After my temporary assignment was up, I did another summer in the Sonoma ECC before becoming the vegetation management program coordinator there for about a year and a half.

In 1988 I became the Russian River battalion chief. I had that assignment longer than any

other I've had. It was also one of the most enjoyable.

I remained there until I was promoted to the Sonoma administrative chief position in 1996. This was at the same time the merger of Sonoma and Lake-Napa Units was being considered, and I was asked to be the planning section chief for that effort. I actually worked as administrative chief in both units concurrently for a year before they merged on July 1, 1997.

A big move for me personally was when I relocated to Redding in 2000 to take the deputy chief position in the Shasta-Trinity Unit after living in Santa Rosa for 18 years.

I held planning and operations section chief positions during the early days of CAL FIRE Command Teams before becoming the incident commander of CDF ICT #3 in 1998. I had to give up that position in 2003 after I was appointed as staff chief of Operations for the Northern Region.

I've enjoyed every position I've held. I was appointed assistant region chief for the Northern Region recently, and I'm looking forward to this next adventure unfolding.

### ***Which of your accomplishments are you most proud of?***

Probably the opportunities I've had to represent CAL FIRE in assisting other agencies during major incidents. It's rewarding to gain the trust of people from

other agencies, both fire and non-fire, and see them take the service we provide and expand on what they've learned. One particular instance comes to mind; that's when a small group of us helped formulate the Lower Russian River Flood Response Plan with the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office and several Fire Protection Districts. It's a plan still in use today in the areas along the river that are prone to severe flooding.

I was also assigned to the Disaster Assistance Branch of OES in 1995 to assist in developing a joint Disaster Field Office with FEMA. That event provided many opportunities to showcase our department's expertise in ICS and demonstrate our leadership abilities when called upon to help mitigate complex emergencies.

Assisting USDA and Food and Ag during the Exotic New Castle Disease was another such assignment. Had you told me earlier in my career that I'd be the incident commander on a Team responsible for chicken disease fighting, I might have thought you were joking. I learned a lot from that assignment and forged some lasting friendships around the country.

Seriously, I don't see our job as getting any less complicated in the future.

***Speaking of the future, what do you see in the future for CAL FIRE?***

We are much more than a fire department, even though we will soon be known as CAL FIRE. We should embrace that fact and take pride in it. I see us continuing to be relied upon to provide leadership in emergency response services and resource protection. I do think that being linked to resource management garners us a lot of political clout. Environmental issues are not going away anytime soon, and I believe that dealing with those issues has an appropriate place within our mission.

Regardless of our organizational structure, I firmly believe our mission will continue to evolve in the "all-hazard" world.

***What do you feel is the biggest challenge facing CAL FIRE today?***

For the short term, I see our biggest challenge being the rapid attrition of our people. We're seeing such a dramatic turnover. We need to really step up our training, especially in operations.

***What would you like to accomplish during your time as Assistant Region Chief?***

One of my goals is to further the "total force" concept in CAL FIRE. I would like our employees to be aware of the value of the other disciplines within the department. Utilizing everyone's talents is important in meeting our mission.

***Tell us about your family.***

My wife Janet and I live in Redding and will celebrate our 28th wedding anniversary in April. We have two grown children; our son David is 26 and our daughter Shannon is 24, both of whom live in Santa Rosa. They have both chosen work outside the traditional emergency services world. I am very proud of them choosing to make it on their own.

***Any hobbies?***

I love to travel and have been doing a lot more of it the last few years.

I enjoy the outdoors, especially hunting pheasant and working with my dog, Otter. He's a Lab/German Short Hair/mutt mix and a natural in the field.

I've also recently taken up the game of golf, though I'm not sure why. I actually enjoy playing, but haven't found the time to get proficient.

***Any concluding comments?***

I'm optimistic about the direction CAL FIRE is headed. I am really pleased by what I'm seeing in Sacramento. I appreciate the Director's collaborative approach to problem solving, dedication to communication and "from the bottom up" management style. I think it's a really good fit for us. I see the interaction between CAL FIRE and the Legislature and the Governor's Office at an all time high right now.

## ***Have an idea for a Communiqué story?***

***You can submit story and photo ideas to the Public Education / Communications Office for the Spring issue. The deadline for submitting is March 1.***

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